



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

An Empire of Letters

Citation for published version:

Stanley, L 2020, 'An Empire of Letters: The Vindolanda Tablets, Epistolarity, and Roman Governance', *The Journal of Epistolary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 4-18.
<<https://journals.tdl.org/jes/index.php/jes/article/view/25>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

The Journal of Epistolary Studies

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



An Empire of Letters: The Vindolanda Tablets, Epistolarity, and Roman Governance

LIZ STANLEY

University of Edinburgh

Abstract: Around 800 Roman *tilia*—writing tablets made from folded slivers of wood veneer and a little over postcard size—have been found in archaeological investigations at Vindolanda, a Roman fort in northern England. Dated to the period 85 CE to 130 CE, their existence is helping revise knowledge of the Roman letter and the part it played in how military governance was organized, the ways in which personal, public, and military aspects were interrelated, as well as informing other relationships existing between the occupying imperial legions and local Britons. Discussion focuses on four connected areas of inquiry. Firstly, it explores the relationship of the several hundred letters to the many other kinds of Vindolanda writings, for this gives perspective on the boundaries of these different genres and the uses to which they were put. Secondly, it analyzes the many overlaps that exist between what are one-to-one letters and what are public documents, and it considers the significance of this for understanding the legion as a form of *familia*. Thirdly, it discusses the role that letters and their cognates, and writing and records generally, played in Roman military occupation and rule. The Vindolanda letters had a particular import because their characteristic mode of expression facilitated and enhanced connections between members of the auxiliary cohorts, in ensuring that the performance of military duties occurred in the context of *familia*-like bonds, and for this to permeate beyond the letters, to the life-and-death activities of soldiering involved. And fourthly, it discusses the importance for epistolary studies of these matters.

Introduction

(*First hand*) ... You ought to decide, my lord, what quantity of wagons you are going to send to carry stone for the century of Vocontius ... on one day with wagons ... (*Second hand*) Unless you ask Vocontius to sort out the stone, he will not sort it out. I ask you to write back what you want me to do. I pray that you are in good health.¹

In this letter, now missing some short sections, a man, likely to be a centurion in charge of some building work at a Roman fort, is asking another military officer to make a decision about wagons needed to transport stone being cut by a detachment of auxiliary legionaries commanded by the centurion Vocontius.² Unusual to modern eyes, there are two handwritings visible, one for the main text and another for the closure and brief salutation at the letter's end. Implicitly, the decision was tardy because Vocontius would not sort things out unless he was prompted; the writer was annoyed, with the tone of the closing and salutation giving an indication of this; and a written response was anticipated. The letter is all about the work being undertaken and how to do this expeditiously. It was written at Vindolanda in about 97–105 CE, and it was either kept by the

receiving officer or put in a fort filing system and later discarded when further building work took place. It is one document among many hundreds that together shine a light on a crucial period of British history, not long after its conquest by the Roman Empire, a gradual process that started in 43 CE and culminated with a major battle at Mons Groepius in 83 CE.

Many Roman *tilia*—writing tablets made from folded slivers of wood veneer and a little over postcard size—have been uncovered in successive archaeological investigations at Vindolanda and are dated to the period 85 CE to 130 CE. Vindolanda was situated on the Stangate, a system of linked Roman forts and settlements that preceded Hadrian's Wall in northern England; its location is some miles south of the present border with Scotland, near modern-day Corbridge and Haltwhistle. The large number of tablets found, with new ones discovered on each subsequent dig; the range of documents involved, along with the many different handwritings—hundreds have been identified; and their varied content, covering many aspects of life at the time not previously known, make them unique.³ Their existence is also helping revise knowledge of the Roman letter, in particular its role in writing and literacy in the Roman army and the part this played in how military governance was organized; the ways in which personal, public, and military spheres were interrelated; and the economic and social relationships existing between the occupying imperial legions and local Britons.⁴ As the discussion following indicates, the *tilia* are important for understanding epistolarity at this time and also raise interesting questions about their relationship with modern-day epistolarity.

The Vindolanda fort was occupied by Batavian and Tungrian auxiliary cohorts of Roman troops over five time-periods, dated around successive rebuildings of the originally wood and later stone fort, as one cohort moved to a new posting and was replaced by another.⁵ Alterations and extensions to the building fabric occurred up until around 130 CE and so covered the period when Hadrian's Wall was being constructed, which began in 122 CE. The *tilia* are a mixture of things that were thrown out as rubbish, (badly) burned, then covered over with mud, recycled as foundations to walkways and roads, or left on floors and built over during rebuildings; and they have survived largely because of the damp, anaerobic conditions in that area, resulting from peat accumulations.

Just under 800 *tilia* have been made available to date, in photographs and transcriptions, in an online edition called *Vindolanda Tablets*.⁶ This builds on print publications,⁷ and two now superseded online incarnations.⁸ They have been classified by the Vindolanda project paleographers / epigraphers as a mixture of literary texts, military reports, accounts and lists, letters, and fragmentary, unclassifiable pieces of tablets termed *descripta*.⁹ Although some wax stylus tablets have been found, the large majority are wood veneer written on in ink with a split nib probably made from quill, and mainly taking the form of linked diptychs, each with a hole, which would have been tied together with cord.¹⁰ This is precisely the case with the letter about cutting stone that opened this discussion.

The Vindolanda *tilia* are fascinating to read, as lively accounts that provide many insights into how their authors saw the world they lived in and represented it to a wide variety of other people, including friends, fellow messmates, craftsmen, slaves, children, commanding officers, civilian traders, and others. Over four hundred named people can be identified together with activities they were involved in.¹¹

The *tilia* as a corpus throw light on Britannia as a Roman province in the late first and early second century when it was occupied by the Roman empire as its northern frontier. This is because their existence as well as their content overturns many assumptions about this period concerning writing, about who wrote or read and who did not, about their reach and importance, and also about

different forms or genres of writing and the ways in which they were written. They also raise important questions about letters of the past, which this present discussion considers by building on related and much briefer earlier considerations of the Vindolanda letters in the context of theorizing letters and “letterness,” that is, epistolary features but those not encompassed by the standard conventions of letters.¹²

The discussion following focuses on four connected areas of inquiry relevant to understanding these letters of the distant past. Firstly, it explores the relationship of the several hundred letters to the other kinds of Vindolanda writings, for this gives perspective on the boundaries of these different genres and the uses to which they were put. Secondly, it analyzes instances of the many overlaps that exist between what are one-to-one letters and what are public documents, and considers the significance of this for understanding the legion as a form of *familia* and the performative character of everyday letter writing within this. Thirdly, it discusses the role that letters and their cognates, and writing and records generally, played in Roman military governance and so in empire as a system of occupation and rule. And fourthly, it considers the relationship between what the Vindolanda tablets indicate about epistolarity at that time and the interesting questions they raise about epistolarity now.

The Tablets: Letters and Other Writings

In a major project involving a range of funding bodies, and building on several decades of both archaeological and palaeographic / epigraphic work, the Vindolanda *tilia* were made available in 2020 in an online edition that provides photographs of the tablets, *variorum* transcriptions of the Latin texts, and—for a sizeable number—English translations as well.¹³ There are currently 777 tablets in this online edition, which will be added to over time, with the tablets themselves now in the British Museum. Given the circumstances of their survival, not surprisingly many are damaged or incomplete, and pose problems in reading let alone interpreting the writing. However, a large number are either intact or sufficiently so to make full sense of them. Discussion here concerns the entire corpus, which has been investigated in a long-term research project as each successive wave of archaeological investigation has released its findings in the print publications referenced in my notes.

From when the first inscriptions appeared, Vindolanda paleographers / epigraphers have classified the tablets under headings corresponding to their interpretations of the conventions for the different kinds of writing prevailing over the time the fort was occupied (85–130 CE). While this interpretation of the conventions has been recognized, and in a sense is inescapable because all the texts in both online and print editions are so classified, the tablets have been read instead by suspending the discrete categories they are assigned to, and instead focusing on the text of each one and what it says. This is in fact in keeping with the spirit of the Vindolanda project approach, which recognizes the problems of classification and comments that it is often difficult to see a document as constrained within one particular category.¹⁴ The distribution of the different kinds of writings as classified by the Vindolanda paleographers / epigraphers is shown in summary in Table 1. In this, and as referenced in my note 7, Tab II and Tab III are the key Vindolanda books that first published the tablets in full, and Tab IV concerns the journal articles that will eventually be assembled as another book.

Table 1. Numbers of Different Documents in the Vindolanda Tablets

	Tab II*	Tab III	Tab IV pt 1	Tab IV pt 2	Tab IV pt 3	Total
Literary Texts	9	0	3	0	0	12
Military Reports	51	7	4	1	0	63
Accounts & Lists	32	30 + 16	6	0	0	84
Letters	144	61 + 33	3	11	4	256
<i>Descripta</i>	220	134	0	8	0	362
Total	456	232 + 49	16	20	4	777

*Also incorporating Vindolanda Tablets I.

However, there are also subcategories within various of the classifications in recognition of the problems. Thus “Literary Texts” contains literary texts as well as shorthand documents; “Military Reports” contains troop-strength reports, leave requests, and similar items; “Letters” are subdivided under headings concerned with particular correspondents; and the “*descripta*” heading subcategorizes a large number of its contents as having some characteristics suggestive of letters. One consequence is that the resulting classifications most likely significantly underestimate the numbers of letters involved relative to the rest. Another is that the proliferation of subcategories as a response to classification issues has the effect of masking rather than confronting or resolving the problems; the approach taken here instead brackets classification, and investigates what is written and done in these writings, considering them as a corpus.

The classification issues are brought into relief when considering the standard characteristics of a letter and comparing this with how the writings classified as letters, and those which are not, relate to this. The Vindolanda paleographers / epigraphers define Roman letters around features such as their mode of address—“*ero sum*”—on opening, how they name the addressees and the authors’ relationship to them, the text being written in two columns, salutations and how they close, where the address is located, and the script the address is written in.¹⁵ Because many tablets are incomplete, the paleographers / epigraphers have also used an implicit set of related criteria that can be inferred in relation to the *descripta* that are subclassified as having epistolary characteristics. These include any signs of a name used in an addressing a person, an appeal to an addressee, the name of the sender in large letters, the way the first line is written, a blank space on the back, an address on the back, or an address in address script. Tacitly, there is also direct address to someone named, being written by an author who is named, and having an expectation of response of some kind. Examples are letters where the anticipated response was the purchase of radishes, and where it was the cohort vet sending a pair of castration shears to the writer.¹⁶

Standard letters are often immediately recognizable in Latin because of their *ero sum* opening, as well as other visible features noted above, such as columns, address on the back, and use of address script. However, what is also immediately visible is that understanding the hundreds of Vindolanda letters in terms of today’s tacitly personal and private view of letters is challenged by the existence on many tablets of two distinct handwritings, as with the letter concerned with wagons and cutting stone that opened this discussion, with most of the letter and the address in one handwriting, and the closure and sign off in another. The main texts of such letters were dictated to scribes, as the existence of corrected “hearing mistakes” indicates.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this does not mean a lack of literacy on the part of the author, that is, the person who wanted the letter to be

written and so authorized it. Rather, the use of scribes was a labor-saving technology, for the handwriting and Latin expression by the persons writing the closure and sign off is often more proficient than that of the scribes.

However, the visible presence of both the person authorizing and the scribe who was writing raises questions for present-day readers—what happens to a personal letter that is from A to B when it is written by a third-party, Z? A well known example from the Vindolanda corpus concerns a party invitation authorized by Claudia Severa, wife of Flavius Cerialis, one of the prefects (who were the commanding officers). This was written via a scribe, signed by her and sent to a friend, Sulpicia Lepidina, wife of Aelius Brocchus, probably also a prefect and in command of the fort at Kirkbride.¹⁸ It thereby becomes a semipublic form of writing and is in today's terms a hybrid. But in the context in which the writers, authors, and addressees were located, it meant something different in terms of what letters were in an ontological sense, which was not a private expression but by definition a public form. This point will be returned to.

It is also notable that while letters conforming to the above standard characteristics can be found, there are surprisingly few of them. Some examples include the above mentioned letter from Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina.¹⁹ Another example is a letter sending greetings from Sollemnis to a messmate who had failed to keep in touch and that also passes on his good wishes to some other friends.²⁰ But much more usual than these standard forms are letters containing various features of other kinds or genres of writing, with these other writings also having many epistolary aspects. Putting to one side how things are formally classified and focusing specifically on content and expression, the frequent overlaps of seemingly different forms of writing is striking. Lists and accounts might be seen as ways of recording that are very different from a letter, but in practice these frequently overlap in the Vindolanda corpus, with the overlaps working in both directions, from letter to list or account, and from list or account to letter. Examples include a request to buy radishes, the need for delivery instructions, and using local Britons as carters, some of which include lists within writings that are otherwise clearly letters.²¹ Also lists and accounts can contain characteristics usually found in letters, such as direct personal address to someone who is not the author, as well as naming the writer. Examples include an account that invokes the addressee, a detailed list or account that is preceded by an epistolary invocation of the addressee and closed with a polite form, and another that includes "I" as the author.²²

Vindolanda letters are typically all business and contain little that is personal. Sometimes this is literally business in the sense of a request or supplying or commenting on goods and services rendered, and sometimes it is in the context of military life and its requirements. Examples include the opening letter in which "my lord" is told he ought to decide what quantity of wagons he is going to send and unless he does so things will not happen; an officer called Masclus requesting that a crossroads meeting is arranged and pointing out that the soldiers' beer ration is exhausted; a load of shingles being disposed of; and Martius, a trader, writing that he has made Victor his agent for some listed transactions.²³

Letters as Public Documents

The parallels between relationships in a legion or auxiliary—to which at this point in time men signed up for a twenty-five-year service period—and those within an extended household or *familia* in Roman society are notable.²⁴ The *familia* was a hierarchical, highly gendered, and affective set of relationships based on kinship and marriage; and it included a diverse group of linked

people, including slaves, servants, freedmen, and often also dependents. The bonds of the *familia* involved questions of honor and proprietary of behavior, of good and appropriate conduct towards others both within and without the *familia*. Shame, or rather the avoidance of shame, along with the pursuit of honor, was consequently an important aspect.

These characteristics can be seen as a backdrop to the extensive letter writing of the Batavian and Tungrian auxiliaries as indicated by the Vindolanda *tilia*. They show the existence of letters as a system of exchanges between people with a strong sense of being connected with each other, and in which the language of family and brotherhood as well as expressions of affection are regularly made. Thus Cerialis writes to Brocchus, “If you love me, brother”; Caecilius September ends his letter to Cerialis, “Farewell my lord and brother”; and a letter to a former messmate begins, “Chrattius to Veldeius his brother and old messmate, very many greetings. And I ask you, brother Veldeius...”²⁵ Marriage for lower ranks of officers as well as ordinary soldiers was not permitted within the twenty-five-year service term, though proxy relationships to marriage will have occurred, while life and death in the legions depended on the military hierarchy and its close bonds, particularly in volatile frontier contexts. The closest bonds in this sense were with messmates, those intermediate in the military hierarchy, and trusted commanders; and as the Vindolanda tablets confirm, this held as good for auxiliary cohorts recruited from subject-peoples as it did for the regular legions recruited from Roman citizens.

These ideas about close connections and associated customary practices took particular shape in the context of life in a long-term occupation by those legions serving on the frontiers of the empire where quiescent local populations could not be guaranteed. The Vindolanda garrison, as noted earlier, was formed by cohorts from the auxiliary legions of the Batavians and Tungrians, and naming practices indicate they were commanded by officers from their own ethnic groups; and in the case of Flavius Cerialis at Vindolanda this was someone who might have been Batavian royalty.²⁶ Such things strengthened bonds within a legion or auxiliary, while the practice of deploying different cohorts to different places while on front line duty also guarded against the possibility of mutiny from within, something that could also happen within the *familia* itself of course. The “band of brothers” thinking used by Roman legions and auxiliaries is connected with this, indicating the strong fraternal connections that existed and linked the men of a legion and cohort to each other by more than ordinary bonds.²⁷

The evidence of the Vindolanda tablets also indicates that literacy and numeracy among the occupying cohorts of Batavians and Tungrians were widespread.²⁸ Tablets have been found from many areas of the different incarnations of the fort, and the existence of a small number of tablets that mention literacy issues and other people either writing or reading for the addressee imply that illiteracy was not generally the case. There were practical reasons for this.²⁹ While not universally literate, nonetheless it is likely that all members of legions including auxiliaries were at the least functionally literate. That is, they could recognize written commands of basic kinds, for these were crucial to the operations of the army and its control of rapid communications, which gave it a distinct advantage over any opposing force, as well as being essential for its bureaucratic system of ubiquitous record keeping and accountability.

Functional literacy and numeracy of this kind appear to have been the bedrock, a supposition supported by the breadth as well as number of writers and addressees within the Vindolanda corpus, including highly literate slaves, children, wives of officers, traders, craftsmen, and lower ranks of soldiers. Moreover, the corpus includes letters uncovered from different parts of the fort, including areas occupied by kitchens, workshops, and ordinary soldier barracks as well as officer

accommodations; and, as noted earlier, where people were not literate and needed help to read the document concerned, there are references to this in the document itself.

Thinking about the hundreds of Vindolanda letters in this context, it is striking that a complex interplay between letter and “not-letter,” and between private and public, occurs very widely, not just in those documents involving men who were of formally equal status. On one level these documents are private because addressed to a single recipient, but they all have a public face as texts that were very much on the record. Thus leave requests made to officers, while in some other contexts written in an entirely formulaic way, at Vindolanda gave rise to variance of expression and how much personal information was included, and also demonstrate the extensiveness of writing ability.³⁰ In addition, someone accused of malpractice and beaten argued his case to the commanding officer of the garrison with great detail and passion.³¹ Many other examples involve men of more equal status. These include a discussion of military provisioning between coequals that also mentions hunting as a leisure pursuit, a letter in support of a promotion request from a third party, and another requesting a lighter military load for a joint friend, Crispus.³² In many documents, the transition between what is business and what is an expression of personal affiliation is shown by the change in scribal hands: “... I have sent you ... through Atto the decurion. I ask, brother, that you immediately strike them off the list. And no others ... have received. I ask that you send the same Atto back to me (*Second hand*) It is my wish that you enjoy good health, my brother and lord. (Back, *First hand*) To ... prefect, from Celonius Iustus, his colleague.”³³ This letter from Celonius also demonstrates another important aspect, which is the relationship between what is written in a letter or other document and what occurs face to face. Indeed, the conveyance of letters themselves, as in this example, depended upon personal delivery, with it having been sent through Atto the decurion. Lastly, the desired response is both that items are struck off the list mentioned and that Atto should return to where the writer was.

As various of the examples mentioned show, then, most often the desired or anticipated response was not a letter in reply but an official course of action of a range of kinds, including leave granted, workload diminished, men redeployed, punishment withheld, money paid, tools or weaponry returned, troops met, beer supplied, items struck off a list, a decurion returned to base, and so on. While it is now customary to see letters as belonging to the private domain of social life, only rarely are the Vindolanda letters of this kind. What is typical, is that letters are part of a performative dynamic between people concerned with getting business done, with the business involved being of a range of practical kinds within the context of military life in an auxiliary legion in one of the frontier outposts of the Roman Empire.³⁴ The communicative exchanges hinge on this, with their other content ancillary, as in the following instance: “... to Optatus his lord, greetings. Just as you had written, I requested—as did Flavius ... licus—the caducary debt. We have a note of hand concerning the horses ... You had scrutinized....”³⁵ This letter reports to Optatus that his previous request to the author had been carried out and the debt canceled, and that a note about horses has been received. As the *tilia* photograph shows, it is missing just its closing salutation and was intended to be all business, treading the border between being a report and a letter.

The role of letter writing in the Vindolanda and wider Roman legionary and auxiliary contexts relied on, as well as expressed, an existing *familia*-type bond between writer and addressee. It drew on this to request a course of action, thereby confirming the position of the addressee as well as the bond because of the debt incurred should the request be granted.³⁶ Overwhelmingly, the Vindolanda letters have these performative aspects. In consequence, present-day notions of public and private need to give way to recognition that, in context, all these documents had an actual or potential public face to them. They were all written in the context of the business of ruling

a frontier province of the empire, and the existence of the system of writing and recording, as well as individual documents within it, existed for highly performative purposes.

The Band of Brothers and an Empire of Letters

The exact relationship between the authors and the addressees of letters is often not detailed because of the incomplete content of quite a few tablets, but certainly all of them were written, dispatched, and responded to under the sign of empire and of legionary life during key decades of the Roman military occupation of Britannia. In this sense, what the Romans established was a system of rule in which control on the one hand and governance on the other depended on wide functional literacy and numeracy, and thus on the writing and uses of documents of different kinds, the means of sending and receiving these, record keeping, filing and archiving—in the latter instance both locally and sometimes in Rome itself.³⁷ There was a military iron fist involved, one that was not hidden in a velvet glove but administered within a bureaucratic system that reached down into fairly minute aspects of garrison life as well as to the highest levels of the empire and its senior personnel.

This does not mean that the emergent, interactional, and face-to-face aspects at local levels were unimportant, of course. Another example of how they quite literally interfaced is provided by a letter explaining that Caecilius Secundus would deal with inappropriate outbursts of anger from a centurion, Decuminus, in an informal as well as formal way:

Front

Caecilius Secundus to his Verecundus, greetings. The tablets which you had written to me I have shown to the centurion Decuminus, that he might know that he ... it ... not of body ... but little outbursts of anger which merit castigation by one's seniors. Concerning which matter, it is more convenient that I discuss it with you in person. For the moment know that all the decurions of this unit ...

Back

To Ilius Verecundus ...³⁸

Before this letter was written, Decuminus had already been called to order by being shown a message from Ilius Verecundus. The letter reiterates the seriousness of the matter to Verecundus, a prefect and commanding officer; it also proposes that something additional is needed and a meeting between Caecilius Secundus and Verecundus would be “more convenient.” Perhaps this was to enable things to be said off the record, for the letter implies that the problem might have caused issues with the decurions; perhaps it was to agree on a strategy for bringing Decuminus into line in a way to avoid bringing dishonor on the cohort; or perhaps it was both. What is certain is that the existence of this letter shows the close association between the written and the interactional, between the documentary and the interpersonal, between correspondence, matters of public record, and people's conduct.

Another important aspect concerns what the Vindolanda tablets demonstrate about the ways in which the military and its occupation of the Stangate area of northern Britannia connected with the local civilian population and produced a system of governance ensuring dependencies and rewards, not just punishments and force.³⁹ Thus, a strict, tablet-defying classification might be a strength report, but it could alternatively be a memo, a hand-over note about recruiting an auxiliary

group of Britons, or indeed a part of a longer letter: “The Britons are unprotected by armour. There are very many cavalry. The cavalry do not use swords nor do the wretched Britons mount in order to throw javelins.”⁴⁰ Whether a strength report, a letter, or a memo, what is clear is that the local population is being assessed here in terms of its fighting capabilities and the perceived strengths and weaknesses of this from the Roman point of view. Whether they were aware of such assessments or not, the Britons had been encompassed within the system of the letter and the written assessments and documentation made for official and, particularly, for military purposes.

However, relationships between garrison soldiers and the civilian population across the Stangate forts were not usually concerned in a direct way with fighting or warfare at this time, but with regulating and administering sustained and mutually beneficial economic exchanges, including the collection of taxes.⁴¹ The men who garrisoned the forts and their smaller outposts were a combination of customs and excisemen, and together constituted a well-oiled military machine should occasion require. One letter tablet gives example to this in specifying the payment due for of grain being delivered by some Britons:

A

... to his -nus greetings. You will receive out of the Britons' carts ... From Rac ... Roman-cus three hundred and eighty-one *modii* of ... grain. Furthermore, they have loaded 53 *modii* into each individual cart. The container which they are conveying ... holds 63 *modii*. ... From Vindolanda with ... and *uelatura*.⁴² Furthermore, they have half the carriage-monies, that is one *denarius* each, and all the *uelatura*; and the part of the carriage-money which you will pay them, I shall duly measure out to you as your fee ... if you offer Verecundus ..., whatever will have been ... Farewell ...

B (*Inverted*)

Gavorignus ... has loaded... as I wanted.⁴³

Was this perhaps compelled labor? Almost certainly not, for the Britons here were paid, having received half on account, being paid the rest of the carriage money when the job was done, when the letter's recipient would also get his fee for making the arrangement. This letter, then, is an indication that economic life was very regulated around and across the border formed by the Stangate forts, including the specification of sums for carting goods of particular sizes and values, and the use of local labor. The tablets contain many similar indications and demonstrate that local economic life was recast around the Roman presence, thereby entering into and becoming a part of its system of regulation and record keeping, as well as provisioning its garrisons with both necessities and luxuries.⁴⁴

The assimilation of Batavian and Tungrian cohorts and particularly their officer class into the status and self-identity of Roman citizens is well attested in the content of the Vindolanda tablets. It certainly also went further than the elite, with an indication being the adoption of Roman-style names throughout the garrison. There are, however, perhaps surprisingly few signs of assimilation by local Britons, although this may be a result of which documents have survived and which have not. The Roman conquest was a gradual process between 43 CE and 83 CE, and it is likely that by this point, some decades on, there would have been examples from local elites around either military or economic activities.

Signs of this would most likely appear first among the various craftsman, merchants, and traders represented across the range of Vindolanda documents, with the Vindolanda paleographers / epigraphers suggesting that the most likely men here are Gavo, a trader who both sold and bought

items from members of the garrison; and Brigionus or Brigio, who a fellow-prefect asked Flavius Cerialis to recommend for an appointment.⁴⁵ The strongest evidence is the Celtic form of their names, as well as his job in the case of Gavo (although this latter argument could be extended to some others).

Gavo was a very active local trader and Brigionus was seeking preferment, the latter able to call upon a very high level of support at the prefect level. However, beyond them there are no signs of other local people appearing by name. Even so, it is clear that the people glossed as “Britons,” and who do not otherwise appear in Vindolanda documents, were fully part of the prevailing system of epistolary communication and of writing more generally: some of them like Gavo had a personal level of literacy beyond the merely functional; and all of them were part of a system of governance predicated not just on the sword, but upon writing, record keeping, filing, and notions of accountability that prevailed from the lower levels of the military and governing hierarchy to the highest. As Alan Bowman puts it, “The effective reduction and domination of large tracts of frontier territory by ... no more than a few thousand men depended upon efficiency of communication that enabled the strategic occupation of key points in a complex network of roads and forts, placed to maximize control over large areas of countryside populated by scattered native settlements and to facilitate the introduction of appropriate social and economic habits.”⁴⁶ It was the efficient communication that was key in enabling the system to work.

Conclusion

The Vindolanda tablets and the complex interrelationships that existed between letters and the other genres of writings clearly demonstrate the important role of writing and literacy in the Roman occupation as well as the key part that writing of all kinds played in how military control and governance were organized and rule was expedited. While the dating of the tablets covers a period of calm in the Roman occupation of Britannia, possible outbreaks of guerrilla or other warfare could not be discounted. However, the signs are of regulation rather than enforcement, with local Britons perhaps coopted into an auxiliary fighting force and certainly into many economic transactions, including being subject to taxation and revenue collection, which were among prevailing military functions. But fighting a war was still within recent memory of many in the army, violence could potentially always erupt, and cohorts and legions might be deployed to fight elsewhere in the empire without much notice. The contents of the tablets demonstrate the very close way that personal and public / military relationships were interrelated, with signs of the “band of brothers” ethos and ensuing *familia*-type bonds present across many. And if such things existed at scale in an auxiliary legion in a rather obscure outpost of empire then it would have existed elsewhere, too.

The meaning and purpose of the letters in the context of the Roman legions and the Roman empire remain varied and intricate. There are many overlaps between the many hundreds of letters and several hundreds of other documents, such that seeing them as exclusively belonging to one classification only has to give way to recognition of the complexities. Unlike the kind of Roman letters usually studied by scholars, which are those of a high elite, overwhelmingly the Vindolanda letters are not standard or literary ones, but rather highly performative pieces of mundane and workaday writing that originated in, addressed, and sought to influence some course of action within a particular context. The idea of a private letter exchanged between two persons only makes little sense and not just because of the widespread use of scribes. This is confirmed by the very few examples of supposedly “standard” letters to be found.

Moreover, it should be recognized that the Roman army was a total institution, as indeed are present-day armies, and in this sense its men were always on duty because tied into the bonds of *familia*—and the letters reflect this. The Vindolanda letters and their cognates, then, are organizational documents intended to be performative in an organizational context, one in which its members depended on each other for matters of life and death, and were very closely connected even where there was no immediate face-to-face or one-to-one link. Modern-day classifications of public and private are simply unsuitable for designating documents that had a distinctive interpersonal as well as administrative purpose.⁴⁷

Most of the Vindolanda tablets were found in caches and not as single *tilia*. That is, they were either part of an archive in the everyday sense of this word, or are likely to have been part of an archive in the formal and bureaucratic sense of a permanent, organized collection including a system of retrieval to facilitate access to past activities and to ensure accountability. The *tilia* could also be tracked upwards in the imperial system, as some important documents were sent to Rome and copies kept locally; and the archive could also work the other way around, with a centralized Roman governance being potentially aware, where military or political circumstances required this, of activities and performance at local levels.

What of letters specifically in this? Letters constitute the majority of documents within the Vindolanda corpus, and not only because there were many people involved who needed to write many times to others, important though that was. As discussion here has shown, most of these writing forms or genres had a porous quality in context, and particularly so the letters, which could contain aspects of all the others while still remaining letters. What was particularly important about these letters as a form of writing was that they not only permitted but also required personal address and the expression of greetings and salutations to a particular person and were signed off by another particular person. In a sense this expression of connection was the fluidity that provided the dynamic that ensured that the performative aspects of letter writing were effective by embodying the bonds involved. That is, their particular contribution was to facilitate, promote, and enhance expression of the connections between the band of brothers in the auxiliary cohorts, thereby ensuring that the performance of military duties had *familia*-like clout behind it. The result bolstered men both in their everyday military activities and in the life-and-death difficulties of soldiering.

What is the other import for epistolary studies? Considering the fairly small size of the Vindolanda garrison even over the fifty-year period that the fort was occupied—just three or four hundred men resident at anyone point—what survives of the tablets suggests that a remarkable level of written communication was occurring. The preponderance of these were letters, but there are also many other kinds of documents, and all them had porous boundaries and could overlap with each other. What this suggests is not just the prevalence of writing, but also its systemic character and epistolary basis. What existed at Vindolanda and across the occupation generally was that governance under Rome was significantly done in a system expedited through and dependent upon not just writing and record keeping but upon letters. Was the porous and flexible character of the ordinary, mundane, and high-volume Roman military letter writing discussed here developed in response to this, or might it have been that the preexisting porous and flexible character of letter writing was a facilitating factor? Whatever, it is clear that letter writing existed at a high volume and was an essential feature of communications; it was a key element in a system that encompassed all members of the garrison and the Britons as well.

While definitional characteristics exist for the Roman letter, these are the product of a somewhat later period and nevertheless concern what is certainly a very different context, that of letters by members of elite groups written within a literary and political frame.⁴⁸ The Vindolanda

letters are very different, being ordinary and mundane, to the performative point, and in the context. Before the Vindolanda letters were discovered, generalizations about Roman letters, about the legions and auxiliary cohorts in relation to literacy levels and writing, and about the Roman occupation and how it was expedited, were all very different. What their discovery has brought into sight—literally so—is that at Vindolanda and at similar locations what Michel de Certeau refers to as a scriptural economy was busy at work in producing and circulating a high level of different kinds of writing, and through its operations other activities were mediated.⁴⁹ What this in turn emphasizes is the importance of context and recognizing that not only did these everyday writing practices add up to being an empire of letters at the heart of governance and rule, but that they also demonstrate that their systemic features were closely connected to the particular social, administrative, and military contexts in which they were situated.

NOTES

The UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ES J022977/1) funded the research on letters drawn on here and its support is gratefully acknowledged.

¹ See *Vindolanda Tablets* 316 (hereafter abbreviated to *Tab. Vindol.*). All quotations from the Vindolanda letters are given in full and taken complete and exact, including ellipses, from English translations in the *Vindolanda Tablets* at (<https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/tabvindol>). Ellipses are as in the online versions and used to indicate now missing parts of the tablets. *First hand* and *Second hand* here indicates the presence of two different handwritings. “My lord” is a politeness between men who were probably equals socially if not necessarily in military terms.

² The chain of command in connection with all military matters discussed herein is as follows: the Vindolanda garrison was commanded by a prefect at the head of the occupying troops composed of auxiliaries (successively of Batavians and Tungrians then Batavians again). A *legion* was composed by troops drawn from Roman citizens, while an auxiliary recruited to it men who were noncitizens. A legion consisted of fifty-nine or sixty centuries in ten cohorts, with each cohort having a small cavalry contingent. A *century* was a unit commanded by a centurion, and they were usually eighty men strong. A *cohort* was one of the subunits of a legion, and each cohort would have six centurions in total. Cohorts were a stronger presence in the auxiliary legions composed of non-Roman citizens. *Optiones* were underofficers to a prime centurion, the second in command. A *decurion* was an officer commanding a *turma*, a troop of thirty cavalry, usually attached to each century, with cavalry positions having greater status. Around these principal officer positions there were specialist officers, and beneath them was a large contingent of infantry and smaller one of cavalry, including some noncommissioned officers.

³ For key discussions, see Andrew Birley, *Garrison Life at Vindolanda: A Band of Brothers* (Stroud: Tempus, 2002); Robin Birley, *Vindolanda: A Roman Frontier Fort on Hadrian's Wall* (Stroud: Amberley, 2009); Alan K. Bowman, “The Roman Imperial Army: Letters and Literacy on the Northern Frontier,” in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, eds. Alan K. Bowman and G. D. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 109–25; and Alan K. Bowman, *Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier: Vindolanda and Its People*, 3rd ed. (London: British Museum Press, 2003). A useful short discussion appears in R. S. O. Tomlin, “The Vindolanda Tablets,” *Britannia* 27 (1996): 459–63. Helpful general accounts are provided by S. Frere, *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999); Finley Hooper and Matthew Schwartz, *Roman Letters: History from a Personal Point of View* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991); and Patrick Wyman, “Letters, Mobility, and the Fall of the Roman Empire,” PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2016.

⁴ The Romans referred to the province they occupied as Britannia and the inhabitants as Britons. The boundaries of Britannia changed over time and were different from those of modern-day Britain.

⁵ Batavia and Tungria were in modern-day Netherlands and Belgium respectively.

⁶ *Vindolanda Tablets* at <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/tabvindol>.

⁷ The essential print publications that first provided the Vindolanda tablets in full are Alan K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, *The Vindolanda Writing Tablets (Tabulae Vindulandenses)*, 3 vols. (London: British Museum Press, 1983–2003); Alan K. Bowman, J. D. Thomas, and R. S. O. Tomlin, “The Vindolanda Writing Tablets (Tabulae

Vindolandenses IV, Part 1),” *Britannia* 41 (2010): 187–224; Alan K. Bowman, J. D. Thomas, and R. S. O. Tomlin, “The Vindolanda Writing Tablets (Tabulae Vindolandenses IV, Part 2),” *Britannia* 42 (2011): 113–44; and Alan K. Bowman, J. D. Thomas, and R. S. O. Tomlin, “The Vindolanda Writing Tablets (Tabulae Vindolandenses IV, Part 3),” *Britannia* 50 (2019): 225–51.

⁸ These were *Vindolanda Tablets Online* at <http://vindolanda.csad.ox.ac.uk>, and *Vindolanda Tablets Online 2* at www.vto2.classics.ox.ac.uk. The tablets are numbered continuously, although in a rather unusual way, because the first group of around 117 were later revised and assimilated into the second group but with their numbers starting at *Tab. Vindol.* 118.

⁹ *Descripta* is a covering term for fragmentary items that cannot be identified with any certainty, although estimates are made about some as subcategories.

¹⁰ *Vindolanda Tablets* provides photographs of all the *tilia*, many of which show this.

¹¹ In a popular vote, they were seen as Britain’s most precious treasure. This was in a television vote in 2003. Visiting numbers at the Vindolanda site confirm their continuing popularity to date.

¹² The relevant publications include Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, “Letters As / Not a Genre,” *Life Writing* 2 (2005): 75–101; Liz Stanley, “To the Letter: Thomas & Znanicki’s *The Polish Peasant...* and Writing a Life, Sociologically Speaking,” *Life Writing* 7.2 (2010): 137–51; Liz Stanley, “The Epistolary Gift: The Editorial Third Party, Counter-Epistolaria: Rethinking the Epistolarium,” *Life Writing* 8.3 (2011): 137–54; Liz Stanley, “The Death of The Letter? Epistolary Intent, Letterness and the Many Ends of Letter-Writing,” *Cultural Sociology* 9.2 (2015): 240–55; Liz Stanley and Margaretta Jolly, “Epistolarity: Life After Death of the Letter?” *a/b: Auto/Biographical Studies* 32.2 (2017): 229–33; Liz Stanley, Andrea Salter, and Helen Dampier, “The Epistolary Pact, Letterness and the Schreiner Epistolarium,” *a/b: Auto/Biographical Studies* 27.4 (2012): 262–93.

¹³ *Vindolanda Tablets* at <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/tabvindol>.

¹⁴ These complexities are usefully considered by the Vindolanda paleographers / epigraphers in relation to *Tab. Vindol.* 164, the text that is discussed later. All tablet references can be accessed at <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/in-scriptions/TabVindol> and searched by tablet number or else by reading continuously from *Tab. Vindol.* 118 on.

¹⁵ See discussion of the format of the tablets generally and the letters in particular at <https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/tabvindol/vol-II/introduction>.

¹⁶ For buying radishes, see *Tab. Vindol.* 301; and for returning the shears, see *Tab. Vindol.* 310.

¹⁷ For an example of a hearing mistake, see *Tab. Vindol.* 234.

¹⁸ For the party invitation, see *Tab. Vindol.* 291.

¹⁹ For both letters by Claudia Severa, see *Tab. Vindol.* 291, *Tab. Vindol.* 292.

²⁰ For Sollemnis’s letter, see *Tab. Vindol.* 311.

²¹ For the radishes, see *Tab. Vindol.* 301; for instructions, see *Tab. Vindol.* 643; and for the British carters, see *Tab. Vindol.* 649.

²² For invoking the addressee, see *Tab. Vindol.* 180; for a list with an epistolary opening, see *Tab. Vindol.* 343; and for a list with “I,” see *Tab. Vindol.* 586.

²³ For the number of wagons, see *Tab. Vindol.* 316; for the beer ration, see *Tab. Vindol.* 628; for the load of shingles, see *Tab. Vindol.* 642; and for Victor acting as agent, see *Tab. Vindol.* 670.

²⁴ On women in Roman military communities and at Vindolanda, see Elizabeth Greene, “Female Networks in Military Communities in the Roman West: A View from the Vindolanda Tablets,” in *Women and the Roman City in the Latin West*, eds. Emily Hemelrijk and Greg Woolf (Amsterdam: Brill, 2013), 369–90. On the *familia* concept, see Jane Gardner, *Family and Familia in Roman Law and Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Ramsay MacMullen, “The Legion as a Society,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 4 (1984): 440–56; and Richard Saller, “‘Familia, Domus’ and the Roman Conception of the Family,” *Phoenix* 38.4 (1984): 336–55.

²⁵ For Cerialis to Brocchus, see *Tab. Vindol.* 233; for Caecilius to Cerialis, see *Tab. Vindol.* 252; and for Chrattius to Veldeius, see *Tab. Vindol.* 310.

²⁶ As this suggests, part of the process of assimilation was the Romanization of names.

²⁷ See especially Birley, *Garrison Life*; MacMullen, “The Legion as a Society”; and Michael Speidel, “Soldiers and Documents: Insights from Nubia. The Significance of Written Documents in Roman Soldiers’ Everyday Lives,” in *Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life*, ed. Anne Kolb (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 179–200.

²⁸ There has been considerable debate about literacy levels, sparked by Harris’s contention that the overall level would be comparable to present-day poor countries with high illiteracy levels. For this, see William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991). It has been pointed out, however, that the analogy breaks down. Firstly, the focus should be the Roman legions rather than subject-peoples; secondly, the Roman provinces of the past are not appropriately generalized about using present-day comparisons; and thirdly, a system of writing can encompass people

even though they may not themselves be fully literate. There are good overviews in Alan K. Bowman and G. D. Woolf, eds., *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). An intermediate position is taken in Alan K. Bowman and G. D. Woolf, “Literacy and Power in the Ancient World,” in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, eds. Alan K. Bowman & G. D. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–16. Arguments that focus on the Roman army and communications tend to put the figure higher. See Alan K. Bowman, “Roman imperial army”; J. H. Humphrey, ed., “Literacy in the Roman World,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* (Supplement 4, 1991); Carol Poster, “The Economy of Letter-Writing in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” in *Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts: Papers from the Lund 2000 Conference*, eds. Tom Olbricht, Walter Ubelacker, and Anders Eriksson (Harrisonburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 112–24; Raphael Schwitter, “Letters, Writing Conventions, and Reading Practices in the Late Roman World: Analysing Literary Reception in Late Antiquity and Beyond,” *Lingvarum Varietas* 6 (2017): 61–78; and Michael Sinding, “Letterier: Categories, Genres, and Epistolarity,” in *What is a Letter? Essays on Epistolary Theory and Culture / Was ist ein Brief? Aufsätze zu epistolarer Theorie und Kultur*, eds. Marie Isabel Matthews-Schlinzig and Caroline Socha (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2018), 21–37. The argument for the more extensive view is persuasively put by Dominic Ingemark, “Literacy in Roman Britain,” *Opuscula Romana* 25/26 (2000): 19–30; and Roger Tomlin, “Literacy in Roman Britain,” in *Literacy in Ancient Everyday Life*, ed. Anne Kolb (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 201–21.

²⁹ See *Tab. Vindol.* 661 for an example of commenting on the addressee’s inability to read.

³⁰ For a number of somewhat different leave requests, see *Tab. Vindol.* 166–76.

³¹ For the appeal against punishment, see *Tab. Vindol.* 344.

³² For the letter mentioning hunting, see *Tab. Vindol.* 233; for support for promotion, see *Tab. Vindol.* 250; and for lighter duties for a friend, see *Tab. Vindol.* 891.

³³ For the letter from Celonius, see *Tab. Vindol.* 345. Roman military organization is indicated in note 2. There are two handwritings on the front of the tablets and one of them appears on the back in writing the address.

³⁴ The term performative is used here in Austin’s sense; see J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

³⁵ For the letter to Optatus, see *Tab. Vindol.* 647.

³⁶ This sense of indebtedness is commented on explicitly in *Tab. Vindol.* 250.

³⁷ As discussed in C. M. Kelly, “Later Roman bureaucracy: Going Through the Files,” in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, eds. Alan K. Bowman and G. D. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 161–76. See also David Breeze, “The Vindolanda Tablets: Review,” *Britannia* 27 (1996): 507–8.

³⁸ For the letter from Caecilius Secundus to Verecundus, see *Tab. Vindol.* 893. Front indicates what was written on the front of the tablets, and back what was written on the back.

³⁹ Helpful discussions of both the short-term and long-term economic impact include Brian Campbell, “Economics of the Roman Army,” *The Classical Review* 54.1 (2004): 198–200; Andrew Gardner, “Vindolanda Tablets and the Ancient Economy,” *Britannia* 45 (2014): 478–79; Ian Haines, “Britain’s First Information Revolution: The Roman Army and the Transformation of Economic Life,” in *The Roman Army and the Economy*, ed. P. Erdkamp (Amsterdam: Gieben, 2002), 111–26; and Koenraad S. Verboven, “Good for Business: The Roman Army and the Emergence of a ‘Business Class’ in the Northwestern Provinces of the Roman Empire,” in *The Impact of the Roman Army (200 BC–AD 476): Economic, Social, Political, Religious, and Cultural Aspects*, ed. Lukas de Blois (Nijhoff: Brill, 2007), 295–313.

⁴⁰ For the “wretched” Britons, see *Tab. Vindol.* 164.

⁴¹ This is discussed in Brian Campbell, “Economics of the Roman Army”; see also contributions in *The Roman Army and the Economy*, ed. P. Erdkamp (Amsterdam: Gieben, 2002); Kasper Grønlund Evers, *The Vindolanda Tablets and the Ancient Economy* (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2011); Gardner, “Vindolanda tablets and the Ancient Economy”; Haines, “Britain’s First Information Revolution”; and Verboven, “Good for Business.”

⁴² *Modii* is a unit of weight, *denarii* is a unit of money, and *uelatura* is a rarely used word connected with transporting or carrying something and might mean a share.

⁴³ For the Britons working as carters, see *Tab. Vindol.* 649. A is the main text; B indicates that the last words have been written upside down or inverted.

⁴⁴ See especially Haines, “Britain’s First Information Revolution”; Verboven, “Good for Business.”

⁴⁵ For documents that concern Gavo, see *Tab. Vindol.* 192, 207, 218, and 649. For documents that concern Brigio, see *Tab. Vindol.* 188 and 250.

⁴⁶ Bowman, *Life and Letters*, 93.

⁴⁷ A present-day parallel is organizational email in a context where an organization is an enveloping feature of life of those working for it and whose relationships with coworkers accordingly take on particular importance around close bonds to expedite organizational activities.

⁴⁸ As discussed in Schwitter, “Letters, Writing Conventions.”

⁴⁹ A scriptural economy is constituted by components of a locally prevailing representational order that includes different kinds of writings. Each component situates audience, author, moment of writing, and what can be written about and how, differently from the others; but they overlap each other and there are intertextual references across them. They are about the same thing, but represent this in different terms, with each scriptural form having its own conventions, although these are mediated in context. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 131–64.